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SUBJECT: A National Forum Discusses the Reform Process

Summary

¶1. The coalition government sponsored a conference called "One Kenya, One Dream: The Kenya We Want" from February 4-6 as a forum to discuss the issues which surfaced during the post-electoral violence, and the coalition's reform agenda to address these. The Ambassador as asked to present a keynote speech in which he emphasized the need for fundamental change through implementation of the reform agenda, including meaningful action against corruption, themes echoed throughout the conference. The Ambassador's remarks, along with those of the President, Prime Minister, and Vice President were carried live on national television (Septel provides text of the Ambassador's remarks).

¶2. According to the government, findings and recommendations from the conference are intended to inform implementation of the reform agenda, including the national constitutional review process. While some non-governmental groups claimed that the conference was not inclusive, in fact a broad range of civil society groups and political parties participated, and critics proved unable to organize a viable alternative event. This was only the third time in Kenya's 45-year history that such a national government-organized forum was held. End Summary.

The Kenya We Want Conference

¶3. The three-day conference organized by the coalition government was held at the national convention center from February 4-6. The importance of the conference was evident from the fact that this was only the third time in Kenya's history that such a government-organized national forum took place. A similar forum was held in 1962, just before independence, and again in 1980 following the death of President Kenyatta. The conference provided a platform to discuss ethnic conflict, social cohesion and international best practices in resolving conflicts. Other topical issues focused on the roles of youth, security institutions and those with disabilities in peace-building. The deliberations were intended to provide frank input on national peace and reconciliation efforts currently being undertaken, and on the progress and nature of the reform agenda being implemented by the coalition government. The conference provided a forum for Kenyans to contribute toward the constitutional review process as well as the agenda for the planned Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission. Lastly, participants provided input with respect to Vision 2030, the Kenyan development blueprint for the period 2008-2030.

Organization and Planning

¶4. The conference was organized by an interagency

secretariat under the Ministry of State for Planning, National Development and Vision 2030. The GOK invited 1500 individuals from Kenya's 150 districts, as well as 500 foreign delegates, including envoys, conflict experts, and former heads of state. Our offer to provide assistance for the organizing and conduct of the conference was eventually declined because the GOK preferred that the conference maintain a strong profile as a Kenyan initiative. The conference was notable for its high-level sustained participation from the political elite as well as a broad range of non-governmental groups and regular Kenyans. President Mwai Kibaki, Prime Minister Raila Odinga, former President Daniel Arap Moi, Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka, and the U.S. Ambassador all provided provocative opening keynote addresses. GOK Ministers, Assistant Ministers, and Permanent Secretaries prominently featured in all sessions, and delegates from across the country were given a chance to participate actively, both during the conference and through on-line contributions in the run up to the event. Discussion was remarkably frank as, for example, when senior leaders of the police forces were accused to their faces of alleged abuses. Issues that dominated the debate included corruption, tribalism, the constitution, reforms, and the bitter legacy of post-election violence.

----- Keynote Speakers -----

¶5. The keynote speakers opened discussion and set a constructive tone by frankly acknowledging Kenyans' concerns to bring about fundamental change, and the skepticism many share that this will happen. The conference opened with a brief documentary film on Kenya's history which, presaging the frank tone of the conference, called attention to the abuses of the "Moi regime." With ex-President Moi sitting on the dais with the President, Prime Minister, and Vice President, this was remarkable and favorably commented upon by many observers.

¶6. The Ambassador noted that the watershed post-electoral crisis had revealed long-simmering underlying grievances and stressed that Kenyans must seize the historical opportunity to bring about fundamental change. He emphasized the need to end the culture of impunity which has plagued Kenya since its independence. "Half measures, whether with respect to reforms or to fighting the scourge of corruption, would not be credible to Kenya or the world," he stated. The Ambassador recalled the speech which then Senator Obama made during his 2006 visit to Kenya, which stressed the need to end ethnic politics and corruption. He pointed out that President Obama also called attention to the importance of fighting corruption in his inaugural address.

¶7. In a disappointing performance, Prime Minister Odinga, who is generally seen as a reformist, failed to tackle the tough issues. Odinga, as did all speakers, condemned "negative ethnicity," argued that "diversity is our strength," and said "there can be no business as usual," but he did not so much as allude to the major problem of corruption. In a surprisingly strong performance, President Kibaki said that "we cannot downplay either our accomplishments or our problems." Ordinary Kenyans stopped the violence, he said, demonstrating in the process that all Kenyan ethnic groups are inter-dependent. He stressed the importance of "full implementation of the reform agenda," and extensively cited the U.S. experience in support of this. The history of the U.S. and election of President Obama should inspire us, Kibaki stated. The U.S. experience demonstrates how institutions can be transformed peacefully from within. Kenyans, therefore, should not lose hope that implementation of the reform agenda will result in real change.

¶8. Former President Moi surprised many with a relatively frank speech in which he commented that "Kenya had deviated from the goals that informed the freedom struggle," and it now cannot feed its citizens due to corruption and negligent leadership. In a rare admission of culpability, Moi said that as President he was "driving a bus, only later to find out that some of those behind him were pickpockets. Corruption is not a one-man thing. I was the

bus driver, but the passengers shared responsibility." Vice President Musyoka jumped on Moi's analogy and urged the current administration "to stop the bus" and deal with the pickpockets. He said "punish the big fish in the fight against graft and end tribalism," and he cautioned the government to stop the double talk and take action.

----- Other Presentations -----

¶9. The theme of the need to end the culture of impunity and to bring about greater accountability and transparency in government was pervasive. Addresses by Minister of Justice Martha Karua, and Dr. Lumumba, constitutional lawyer and former secretary of the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission, provided the foundation for two of the conference's most engaging sessions. Karua, unlike her peers, did not downplay criticism of the government's less than expeditious implementation the reform agenda and lack of effective action against corruption. In her hard-hitting remarks, she spoke candidly about the need for electoral and political party reform. She also challenged participants to examine their own role in Kenya's culture of impunity, noting that all Kenyans are responsible whether by commission or omission. She called for a culture of personal responsibility, remarking that "tribe" is too often used as a shield to personal responsibility. In asking Kenyans to reexamine their role, she called upon the government, including the executive branch, to take full responsibility for their failures and to rededicate itself to delivering reforms.

¶10. Lumumba, a gifted orator, addressed the issue of ethnicity in Kenya. Noting that the theme of the Kenyan elite is "keep them poor, keep them ignorant, and buy them cheap," he called for an end to negative ethnicity via new approaches to civic education, decentralization, regional integration and, most importantly, leadership. He chastised the government for even having a debate on whether ministers should "step aside" to allow for investigations of alleged corruption; instead they should resign. "This issue is one of moral responsibility not criminal liability," he stated. Lumumba seemed to capture the mood of Kenyans, for his remarks were received with rapturous applause and the event's only standing ovation.

----- Alternative Forum -----

¶11. Some members of civil society who rejected the "Kenya We Want Conference" as a meeting of political elites and their foreign backers organized a parallel forum dubbed "The Peoples' Conference: The Kenya We Do Not Want." After initial indications that the police planned to interfere with the conference, the Ambassador and others weighed in with the Prime Minister to restrain the police and allow for what was planned as a peaceful and democratic expression of alternative views. In the end the conference attracted approximately 100 participants, mostly students. The speakers largely touched on the same issues echoed across town at the "Kenya We Want" conference: ending corruption, poverty and hunger, and the need for good governance, a new constitution, and accountability. The organizers of the "The Peoples' Conference," led by the National Civil Society Congress, drafted and sent a letter of petition to Kofi Annan in support of a Special Tribunal for Kenya that is free of political interference.

----- Comment -----

¶12. Many speakers cited the election of President Barack Obama as providing Kenyans hope, in terms of overcoming ethnic prejudice, fulfilling individual potential, and in promoting an even stronger US-Kenyan partnership. In the end, the extensive live television and other media coverage of the very frank discussions proved skeptics wrong that the conference would be a waste of time. While Kenyans clearly seem to know what kind of Kenya they want - with consensus on the need to end the culture of impunity and to carry out the reform agenda - the discussions will serve to keep pressure on the coalition government to achieve

results. While the forum clearly provided for free and unfettered speech, it remains to be seen how the coalition government will incorporate the findings and recommendations into a clear and actionable plan to support implementation of the reform agenda and to bring about fundamental change. End Comment.
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